

Wars that Never Take Place: Non-events, 9/11 and Wars on Terrorism

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II

War on terror

If all responses to 9/11 as an inimitable “event” are “artificial,” then all subsequent conflicts will be simulated. There is fakery, there is more deception: *trompe l’oeil*. Hence the war on terror is a contingency, fake, simulation that is “superimposed” on 9/11. The war on terror bears out Baudrillard's Gulf War thesis. The key aspect to Baudrillard's “non-event” thesis is restraint, holding back. There is no true commitment to a deployment of forces in conflict. Neither side is entirely willing to commit to a full-scale deployment of forces, largely because the nature of a “war on terror” renders such a conflict impossible.

The playacting of the Gulf War simulation features familiar actors from the “war on terror” and CNN - now rivalled by an Arabic equivalent in Al-Jazeera – along with the Pentagon simulators, again manage the film clips. The war that is fought electronically, with precision guided “smart” weapons and with deceptive strategies, is also a war without politics. Baudrillard writes that the present war on terror is simply devoid of the political, “a continuation of the lack of politics by other means.”³⁷ As the symbolism of the terrorist attacks could not be transcended through any adequate counter-response, the retreat into virtual war has been the only answer on offer.³⁸

This slide into the simulacrum is made apparent in a brief account of how the protagonists situated themselves. Afghanistan was attacked, but the Coalition never captured bin Laden. In place of the authentic Saudi, there was a cyber-virtual terrorist, infinitely reproducible as simulation on the world wide web, and through his own videos, leaving us with the impression that bin Laden may never have “existed.” Links to 9/11 tended to fade away in the reporting: they may as well not have been any connection between bin Laden and the attacks in the first place. The non-event was reshaped in the Third World through a denial of the link between bin Laden September 11. And even if he did commit the act, he became a hero: “As the net closes in on his Afghan hideout, he is being idolised by many in the Middle East as the man who dared to strike a blow at the world's only superpower.”³⁹ There is a Western conspiracy to criminalize; there is a Middle Eastern conspiracy to edify and sanctify. These contrary representations correspond to Baudrillard's notion of the “set-up” which attempts to capture the event that cannot, of its own accord, “occur.” Bin Laden is dead one day; resurrected the next. He is in Tora Bora trapped in December 2001, then he escapes because of an agreement that is made between Al Qaeda and the guards of the Northern Alliance.⁴⁰

Another aspect of the non-event in the wars against terror is the incorporation of all singular cultures into the global system, which might be read as confirming Baudrillard's way of suggesting the triumph of the simulacrum. Operation “Enduring Freedom,” the name given to the first U.S. operation in Afghanistan, deployed deterrence against the challenge of fundamentalism: a theme Baudrillard developed in his Gulf War thesis as a fetish for “the law of democracy” that attempts “the domestication of the refractory forces of the planet ... All that is singular and irreducible must be reduced and absorbed.”⁴¹

The ostensibly pro-“democratic” discourse of “the Coalition of the Willing” ignores the human rights records of many of the regimes which help make up the Coalition's numbers.

Past histories of brutality are rendered invisible, and the liberal credentials of these countries become better than “real”. Again, we might argue that an obvious limit to Baudrillard’s thesis can be shown here. There is merely deception, not simulation: we know the true nature of these regimes, they are illiberal regimes supplied with “liberal” attributes for ideological convenience; Operation “Enduring Freedom” is simply American realpolitik masquerading as a humane rescue mission. But in actual fact, we probably do not know what the “truth” about their disposition is: after all, President Pervez Musharraf was a hero and an oppressor simultaneously. A coup leader against a democratically elected leader (Nawar Sharif) has become a man of “courage and vision” seeking to create a “progressive, modern, democratic Islamic society.”⁴²

In a sense, the Gulf War was in fact the triumph for Saddam that he claimed it was: “Saddam liquidates the communists, Moscow flirts with him more; he gasses the Kurds, it is not held against him; he eliminates the religious cadres, the whole of Islam makes peace with him.”⁴³ The war against terror has seen a similar triumph for dictators, indeed a triumph of Saddam “copies” across the authoritarian spectrum. We are witnessing not the spiral into the unprecedented terror of the symbolic “provocation”, but the triumph of the simulacrum over the symbolic – the Gulf War logic over the September 11 logic. There is just one vital difference in the war against Iraq: Saddam, for years a feature of the non-event in the Middle East, had to go.

War on Iraq

The Iraq war invokes various images to constitute its “reality”: the image of Hussein’s brutality as its founding premise, and the “freedom” supplied by the Coalition as its telos. Baudrillard alluded to this tendency during the Gulf War, where he was keen to condemn the credulity of western audiences, convinced by a “hypocritical vision” of “the pious and the objective”. Saddam was, by contrast, more knowledgeable of the immoral nature of the image: “Saddam, for his part, knows what the media and information are: he makes a radical, unconditional, perfectly cynical and therefore perfectly instrumental use of them.” Baudrillard pointed out the fraudulence of the actions of both sides: an Iraqi side who blew up decoy civilian buildings to conform to the rules of “dirty war” and an American side who sought to “disguise satellite information” to conform to the rules of a just and clean war.⁴⁴

In the processes leading to the war on Iraq, similar issues of simulation were played out. The most obvious ones: Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, and whether his security services played a part in the 9/11 attacks. First, the drama of popularised weapons of mass destruction. Statements were repeatedly made before the war that Iraq had been disarmed in 1998, most notably by Scott Ritter, former UN Arms Inspector. Writing in the middle of 2002, Ritter suggested how, “We could account for 90 percent to 95 percent of Iraq’s proscribed weaponry, versus the 100 percent required by the Security Council.”⁴⁵ In effect, the implication behind these suggestions was that all proceedings discussing disarmament were vacuous, and any prospect of disarming Saddam was nonsense from the start. The UN weapons inspections could never lead to any positive result, mocked as they were by the build-up of Coalition forces in the Gulf. Regardless of Hans Blix’s suggestions that disarming Iraq by peaceful means was possible over a matter of months, the Coalition was preparing for the inevitable strike, rendering diplomacy nugatory. As Blix himself admitted a few days before the assault, his weeks of work would bear no fruit, with the United States “doubtful from the beginning” of any value behind weapons inspections.⁴⁶

The parodic, simulated nature of the historical event was also evident within the United Nations itself. In the UN diplomatic manoeuvring, two camps dedicated themselves to a theatrical display surrounding disarmament and weapons inspection. Was there any truth to this entire process? Clearly, even the powers opposing war also believed in what did not exist: the weapons of mass destruction. Each power conjured up the necessity that these weapons existed: there was merely dissent as to how Iraq would be disarmed. The Franco-German proposal, with Russian and Chinese backing, for greater inspection teams and a longer framework for disarming Iraq was placed alongside the Anglo-American position that Saddam was not disarming at all. In late February 2003, Catherine Colonna, Jacques Chirac’s spokeswoman, was claiming that, “France wants to give disarmament in Iraq through peaceful means every chance of succeeding, through inspections that should be pursued and reinforced.”⁴⁷ At the same time, world audiences were witnesses to the absurd spectacle of Iraq disarming as Coalition troops were gathering for an assault. Baghdad had in effect succumbed to the simulacrum, mocking the very absence of weapons they were claiming did not exist by disarming their own arsenal. In effect, we were witnessing the

media spectacle of simulated relations between the various parties: the simulation of Iraq's disarmament of weapons it claimed it did not have; and the impossibility of valuing any act of disarmament by Iraq since any such move was valueless for Britain and the United States.

The second notable simulation was the attempt by the Coalition to connect Saddam Hussein's regime with the attacks of September 11. The parody was evident from the start: a secular regime that had been supported by the West against the fundamentalism of Iran in the 1980s, was now represented as a power that supported Muslim fundamentalist terrorism in the twenty first century. The evidence against Iraq in this respect, much of it obtained from Al Qaeda detainees in camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, was not closely scrutinised. France, Germany and even Israel have regarded the evidence as dubious, another simulation.

Then the war began. In Baudrillardian terms, this was a war that de-realised "reality" by imagining events that never occurred. Saddam was the first subject of this de-realisation. Questions circulated in the first week of the war as to whether Saddam had been killed, recalling the speculation about bin Laden's whereabouts that featured in the war in Afghanistan. A columnist in the *Baltimore Sun* asked whether it was "really him in those grainy images from Iraqi TV that show a puffy Hussein meeting with his military commanders and his two nutty sons? And if so, when was that footage shot?"⁴⁸ Then came the absolution of simulation, just as it came for bin Laden: whether dead or alive, his existence was irrelevant.⁴⁹ In the words of terrorism observer Saul B. Wilen, the United States should simply issue a declaration of Saddam's death and continue with the war. "Let's not agonize over this. If we're wrong, prove us wrong."⁵⁰ The onus ceases to be on the Coalition to prove that he is alive. The burden of proof is placed on Saddam to prove his own existence.

Then there were the supposed mass uprisings in Southern Iraq that never eventuated and were yet reported on the BBC; the fictitious control of the Allies of large tracts of Iraq with residents who refuse to acknowledge US rule, yet who are represented as pro-American. There was also the bringing down of Saddam's statue in Farduz Square in Baghdad on early April 9. Anti-American protesters in the media simulations "disappeared," replaced by the American flag and cheering citizens. Was it a coincidence that this entire "event" occurred in front of the main hotel for those masters of simulation, the media? Photos of the "event" show that there were no throngs, no crowds exultant at the falling Saddam statue.⁵¹ There were American tanks surrounding a near deserted square. Nor was the American flag initially draped over the statue the same one "rescued from the debris" of the Pentagon when it was attacked on 9/11.⁵²

Most importantly for the supposed *raison d'être* of the war, the weapons of mass destruction refuse to surface. Australian Defense Force Chief General Peter Cosgrove put this down to the wily, deceptive practices of his opponents. The orientalist imagery of the mendacious carpet dealer which, according to Baudrillard, informed the Western accounts of the first Gulf War also seem to structure Cosgrove's comments here. Cosgrove saw discovered chemical suits and masks not as evidence of Iraqi attempts to defend themselves against any Coalition attack, but as "circumstantial evidence that this is a chemical warfare environment." Cosgrove refused "to believe that ... these pristine chemical suits and these chemical training centres and antidotes to chemicals found on the battlefield are somehow unrelated to the fact Saddam has a chemical warfare capability."⁵³ Even after the official conclusion of military operations, the Coalition forces still could not find any weapons of mass destruction. Nonetheless, the Department of Trade and Foreign Affairs continues to be confident that "Iraq's WMD programs will be uncovered."⁵⁴ Bush's speech in late April provides the *reductio ad absurdum*: "It's going to take time to find [the weapons], but we know he [Saddam Hussein] had them. And whether he destroyed them, moved them or hid them, we're going to find the truth."⁵⁵ This is hardly a case of dissimulation: it is the belief that these weapons do exist, a simulation of something that does not exist.

Conclusion

The usefulness of Baudrillard's critiques of both the Gulf War and September 11 lies in providing an alternative interpretation of these "events" and "non-events." Baudrillard's sceptical and defamiliarising account presents the observer with an alternative to the moral pretensions of the Coalition, and a chance to critically interrogate the premises of the present war on Iraq. The views expressed by Baudrillard on the attacks of September 11 have been

extended in this essay. I have suggested that the war on terror is a Baudrillardian spectacle in which strategies of simulation submerge the “symbolic” challenge to the simulacrum which the attacks presented. There are logical limits to Baudrillard’s analysis, especially with regard to his tendency to run together the concepts of simulation and dissimulation. But, arguably, there are also conceptual and theoretical dividends to be gained in taking seriously a theory which seems so at odds with itself. The theory, despite - or, rather, because of - its contradictions or tensions, seems appropriate to the overwhelmingly simulated “reality” in which we are now, inescapably, positioned.

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Notes

37. Baudrillard, “Spirit,” p. 142.
38. Baudrillard, “Spirit,” p. 142; “Das ist der vierte Weltkrieg,” *Der Spiegel*, 3 (January 14, 2002).
39. Frank Gardner, “The Cult of Bin Laden,” BBC News, September 24, 2001.
40. *Christian Science Monitor*, March 4, 2002.
41. Baudrillard, *Gulf War*, p. 86.
42. George W. Bush, “Remarks by President Bush and President Musharraf of Pakistan in Press Availability,” Office of the Press Secretary, White House, February 13, 2002 available at <http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/nea/sasia/text/0213bshmsfh.htm>, accessed March 2, 2001.
43. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War*, p. 71.
44. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War*, pp. 46-7, 62.
45. Scott Ritter, “What, If Anything, Does Iraq Have to Hide?” *Newsday*, July 30, 2002, reproduced at ZNet, <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=40&ItemID=2174>, accessed March 3, 2003.
46. Words on the BBC, Interview, March 20, 2003.
47. Quoted in “France to Make New Disarmament Proposals,” *AFX European Focus*, February 24, 2003.
48. Kevin Cowherd, “Dead or Alive – Where is Saddam Hussein?” *Baltimore Sun*, April 3, 2003, p. 1D.
49. See Binoy Kampmark, “The Spectre of Bin Laden in the Age of Terrorism,” *CTheory: Journal of Theory, Technology and Culture*, vol. 25, no. 3, November 14, 2002, available at http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=355
50. Quoted in Cowherd, “Dead or Alive,” p. 1D.
51. See the Centre for Research on Globalisation, “The Pulling Down of the Statute Was a Staged Event,” April 11, 2003, available at <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/NYI304A.html>, accessed May 3, 2003.
52. See the findings of Media Watch, “Blair is Toppled,” ABC Television, from May 5, 2003, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/>
53. Quoted in John Kerin, “Terror Tactics Surprise Coalition,” *Australian*, April 2, 2003, p. 4.
54. DFAT, “Australia and Iraq,” May 2, 2003, available at http://www.dfat.gov.au/globalissues/iraq_wmd/index.html, accessed May 2, 2003.
55. Quoted in Linda S. Heard, “Repeat After Me: Iraq is Weapons Free,” *CounterPunch*, April 28, 2003.

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